

FISH and WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: April 25, 2019

Agenda Item: Big Lake WMA Agricultural Lease Renewal (R5)

Division: Wildlife

Action Needed: Final

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 5 minutes

Background

FWP proposes to renew a six-year agricultural lease on a small portion of Big Lake Wildlife Management Area (BLWMA), approximately 17 miles north of Columbus in Stillwater County. The BLWMA is managed for waterfowl and upland game bird production, public hunting (for upland birds, waterfowl, mule deer, antelope), bird watching, and photography. The purpose of the lease is to formalize a reciprocal agreement with a local rancher for mowing services along a public access road and parking areas, decreasing the potential for wild fires. In exchange for mowing the access road, the lessee would be allowed to cut and bale up to 20 acres of hay annually on BLWMA for his own use. Haying (July 15-Aug. 31) would continue in a rotation within two areas encompassing approximately 57 total acres. A mix of alfalfa, clover, and tall and intermediate wheatgrass were planted on these areas over a decade ago to provide dense nesting cover for waterfowl and upland game birds. Periodically haying portions of this cover helps to maintain productivity and provide a diverse age structure benefiting waterfowl, upland birds, big game, and other wildlife. Haying locations would be determined annually by the WMA managing biologist. As in the past, the lessee would be required to remove all baled hay from the WMA by Aug. 31.

Public Involvement Process & Results

The proposed lease renewal EA was available for public comment from Nov. 1 to Nov. 30, 2018. One comment was received from a private individual. That comment supported the lease renewal. A decision notice supporting the lease renewal was completed in early January 2019.

Alternatives and Analysis

Proposed Action: Renew an agricultural lease with neighboring landowner (Ron Dannenberg) to reduce wildfire potential and maintain/improve seeded cover for wildlife on the WMA.

Alternative A - No Action-lease not renewed: No periodic haying would occur on the WMA. Over time this would result in a decline in habitat quality. Fire fuels would accumulate on the access road and parking lots, increasing the risk of fire caused by vehicles driving and parking in tall vegetation.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale

FWP recommends renewal of the proposed lease. Continuation of the rotational haying and road mowing would maintain wildlife habitat and reduce fire danger, while benefiting the lessee's ranch operation.

Proposed Motion

I move the commission approve the six-year Big Lake WMA haying lease with the neighboring Dannenberg Ranch.